

The level of homophobia & acceptance of actively open gay football players in the NFL
compared to professional athletes in the NBA, MLB and MLS

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Abstract

The level of acceptance of an active NFL player who identifies with the LGBTQ community, is more intolerable in the NFL compared to other major sport organizations like the NBA, MLB and MLS, who are more embracing of the LGBTQ community. This study analyzes how credible newspaper media outlets in the sports world treat LGBTQ football players compared to LGBTQ athletes in MLB, MLS and NBA.

Using qualitative content analysis, articles will be selected from news outlets that are deemed as credible, established and have a large audience when it comes to sports, gender, and sexuality. Once selected, the articles will be coded according to the following themes which were identified as important in the literature. This is a timely and important topic; gay marriage has been legal for over five years, but discrimination based on sexual orientation does still occur, especially in the world of professional sports. This study predicts that gay male athletes framed by media as more promiscuous, traumatized, damaged, mentally unstable or portraying feminine tendencies, experience higher level of homophobia compared to LGBTQ athletes in basketball, soccer, and baseball. Results indicate that an unceasing trend of judgement carried on by majority of NFL players and the NFL organization, increases the chance of discriminatory repercussions and heightened homophobia against a male professional athlete who musters up the courage to come out as gay while active on a roster.

Introduction

Professional athletes are often praised for making it to such a prestigious level. In many ways they are revered in society for their exceptional athletic ability. However, an athlete's acceptance is largely contingent upon both their organization of sport and their sexual orientation. Many professional athletes of the NFL are harshly criticized or shunned for coming out as gay or identifying with the LGBTQ community. The criticisms that LGBTQ athletes face have the potential to vary depending on whether they play in the NFL, NBA, MLB or MLS. This study asks whether the media treats and talks about athletes differently based on both their sport of organization and sexual orientation. Using the qualitative content analysis of major U.S. media outlets, this research will examine how the media treats the LGBTQ athletes in the NFL compared to the NBA, MLB and MLS. Media articles will be selected randomly to minimize potential for sampling bias, and the articles will be categorized based on the acceptance of the gay athlete based on the sport, with 50% of the articles focusing on why gay men aren't accepted in the NFL and 50% focusing sport organizations that are accepting of their athletes no matter what their sexuality is. Specifically, I will code the articles according to the following themes: physique, sexuality, dating life, promiscuity, mannerisms, behavior, body language, childhood molestation, rape/assault, mental health, and transitional medicine/hormonal therapy. I will systematically code the articles according to the themes and provide a detailed analysis of the results. Male athletes' sexuality will be framed more often as a distraction to the broader goals of the team.

Literature Review

In the NFL, where there is true masculinity and strength, there are many players who are secretly gay or bi-sexual. Historically, these are the players that experience the most homophobia, due to the fear of rejection from fellow teammates and the use of taunting words like "sissy" in such places like the locker room (Atlantic, 2014). In the world of football when it comes to males being gay, "grown men should not have female tendencies, period" tweeted by ESPN football analyst, Johnathan Vilma (*The Atlantic*, 2011). Vilma is a previous linebacker who was drafted in the 1st round of the 2004 NFL Draft. It is deemed to be a masculine strong-armed sport for years where the male is automatically presumed to marry a woman and create a family. If the player does not abide by that social norm, and wants to marry a male instead, his football career is doomed, he loses fans, money and isn't able to play the sport he loves

like he would if he didn't reveal his sexuality. The word fear in this context meant the player was afraid to be his true self and afraid of the consequences if he comes out.

It is also the fear of the "gay player's ability to do violence" (Atlantic, 2014). This trend of homophobia progressed when Michael Sam, a closeted football player who wanted to be the first openly gay player to sign and play in the NFL, announced his sexual orientation before he got drafted by the Rams in 2013. Even though the NFL appeared to be accepting, Sam's playtime was short lived, due to trending articles that showed the frequent use of words like, fear and femininity. This led the NFL to believe that a gay player would not have the ability to be aggressive enough. This announcement resulted in the majority of the NFL refusing him an official place on a roster, based on his sexuality alone. These are the moments where diversity and inclusion come into question within the National Football League. This particular action the NFL took did not correlate with their organizational values about the importance of mental health and accepting a football player as they are. 'When it comes to queer inclusivity, women's professional sports leave men's in the dust' and male athletes who appear to lack aggressiveness, find themselves labeled as a "pansy" or a "queer" (Sociology in Sport and Social Theory, 2010)

Today, many NFL players who are not ready for such change feel that grown men should not have female tendencies or portray weakness. Sports news outlets like Sports Illustrated, ESPN, Bleacher Report are always open minded when it comes to athletes revealing a secret or having an important announcement to the world. They will support the courage it takes for athletes like, retired NBA player Jason Collins, to voice beliefs of gender equality but not necessarily encourage their relationship to be with a man. As Collins said "From my standpoint, it's absolutely insane to criminalize someone for being who they are ... It's on the same level to me as discriminating against someone because of race." (United Nations Free & Equal, 2014). Retired NBA player John Sally told HBO "John Rocker would be accepted, you know into the N.A.A.C.P. first than a gay guy on the team" (New York Times, 2000). Based on 25 articles, the term homophobia was used in the textual data but describes the attitude and public image of the National Football League because they are not accepting of active gay football players who want to reveal that they identify with the LGBTQ community during football season.

In 2019, a study about gay professional hockey players being accepted in the hockey culture suggested, "professional players fear intolerance, but they also feel an overriding threat of becoming a distraction if they were to identify as gay" (The Nation, 2019). This pattern is obvious in the NFL today.

Newspaper outlets such as The Nation have used ethnographic disciplines that contribute to the perception of a professional athlete if he were to identify as gay, according to an article published in 2019.

“My coaches try to motivate us to hit harder, crunch more, or throw farther by calling us fags all the time, if you can’t do something , or mess up, you get called a fag” (In The Game,2004, The Nation, 2019; In the Game, 2005). This discipline brings their everyday life to experience reality once they identify with the LGBTQ community while actively being on the playfield. Mentally, being taunted by teammates through jokes about homosexuality really takes a toll on the athlete who is secretly the homosexual in the room. A standardized survey would not result in this perspective because it doesn’t express the same level of importance of change. In the large homophobic views of the media newspaper outlets such as the Atlantic, The Washington Post, TIME, the textual data uses words like inclusion and diversity, but these are not adjectives for the NFL. The NFL is deemed as the last major league sport to really support LGBTQ. Rolling Stone and The New York Times are very supportive for voicing or publishing articles on behalf of the LGBTQ community.

Unlike the NFL, other male dominated sports leagues like MLB and the NBA really do dedicate their support to their athletes who support the LGBTQ community. During the LGBT Pride Parade in New York, the NBA was the first league to support and participate by marching in this annual event, attended by the NBA commissioner and deputy who are big supporters of the LGBTQ community. The Los Angeles Dodgers are one of the only teams that have an official “LGBT Night”, a promotion like that has yet to extend to all different sports. Not every team has an LGBT-themed promotional night in the first place. There is more homophobia in the world of football because it is deemed to be the most masculine strong-armed sport for years. Men are automatically presumed to marry a woman and create a family, due to this norm gay players are not fully accepted in the NFL. Though the NFL works closely with Wade Davis, a former player that came out after his career in the league. “He speaks with the teams and helps bridge the LGBT community and the league. He acknowledges that “the NFL still has to do more,” while also contending that the league has taken strides toward inclusion.” (Rolling Stone,2016).

Methodology

The methodology used in analyzing this data is known as content analysis. The *content analysis* method allows society and members of the professional sports world to understand the everyday lives of a gay male professional football players who have come out in their professional sport and suffered up until that point in their life mentally, emotionally and physically. These theoretical approaches correlate to discovery principles and openness because

of how long a football player keeps his sexuality in secrecy and the world discovering that player's social reality:

1. Symbolic Interactionism- pursue subjective meanings and individual sense of attributions good.
2. Phenomenology- experience of an individual's state of mind battling with reality.
3. Ethnomethodology & constructivism- interested in everyday routine and the construction of social reality.
4. Structuralist or Psychoanalytical – patterns used in newspaper media outlets to interpret the behavior of a professional athlete.

I used this methodology because it is more open and involved in the culture of our society. There are many homophobic words that are used in articles to describe a professional athlete's journey on "coming out" that deem a conservative view. For example, NFL players who lack privacy are constantly under surveillance, and sometimes have to act so they don't violate social norms of a heterosexual male or lose their contract. They are also required to have a certain level of physical skill and strength, frequent use of certain words and the reaction of the media to one's coming out. This indicates that the professional world of sports has conservative homophobic views more so against male than female athletes. These words are indicators of the degree of unacceptance which is used frequently to talk about topics such as sexuality in professional sports. Newspaper articles have used ethnographic disciplines that contribute to the perception of a professional athlete, creating a judgement of their everyday life as an opening gay athlete, this brings their everyday life to a reality and what they experience once they identify with the LGBTQ community while actively being on the playfield. A standardized survey would not result in this perspective because it doesn't express the same level of importance of change. Popular media newspaper outlets like the Atlantic, frequently produce articles that express homophobic views within the world of sports.

Why is content analysis the best methodology?

To answer this question projects, make use of qualitative content analysis. Content Analysis has been around since the beginning of the twentieth century and has been used largely

in qualitative research to study social reality. Reality for some people corresponds to the development of complicated life forms and identities that are only meaningful to them but not to members of society or the organization of a professional sport. NFL players for example start their football career at an early age and develop to a professional level of skill set over a period. At an early age they learn the fundamental mechanisms to grow into a professional football player, but they have experienced everyday processes that construct their character and identities as a person as well. Qualitative research discovers certain basic processes that initiate this change. Our society uses certain indicators and textual data that determine one's interpretation or assumptions of a professional athlete's sexuality and gender norm. This analysis will help this sensitizing concept become more normalized for those people with subjective views against football players who want to reveal that they identify with the LGBTQ community as an active player. This correlates to a discovery principle and openness because of how long a football player keeps his sexuality in secrecy and the world discovering that player's social reality.

Process of Methodology

Data in this project on qualitative content analysis of media articles, has been assembled by 25 articles from media publications including The Washington post, The New York Times, The Guardian, Time USA Today. I also selected articles that focused more on sports such as Sports Illustrated, The Bleacher Report, The Sports Journal and OutSports. These prominent outlets were chosen because they exemplify the culture of major professional sports, they have large audiences, well established journals with strong credibility within the sports world and beyond.

Specifically, 25 articles were selected solely focused on sexuality in sports and analyzed carefully coding and reading through in search for salient themes. Themes were identified based on how relevant they were to the topic; these themes have previously been deemed as important in the literature of 'the acceptance of homosexuality and identifying with the LGBTQ community'. Articles were categorized based on when athlete's careers and when they came out of the closet. This strategy yielded two groups of articles; players who came out early and players who came out late. Early was defined as during the beginning or middle of their career,

late being defined as towards the end of their career or after they retire. Articles were then coded, according to themes; events, behavior, attitude and feelings.

The first level of coding was in reference to the sexuality of the athletes. Each article coded words such as; gay, bi, bi-sexual, sexual orientation, coming out, closeted gay, openly gay. The second level of coding focused on how these athletes were received once they revealed their true sexuality. Here I coded for words such as change, delicacy, fear, secrecy, terrified, hazing, tolerant, worried, cold feet, strong. These types of words indicate the level of barriers that these athletes face from the beginning of their careers all the way to the end. Once the articles have been coded based on these themes, any patterns that emerge in the data will be analyzed.

This methodology yields reliable and valid results. Reliability was assured because the articles are representative of media portrayals of professional athletes who identify with the LGBTQ community. These articles selected were not outliers, rather they coincided with the typical understandings of the way the media treats these athletes. Results of this study are valid in that they capture two different experiences of athletes based on when they come out of the closet before the beginning of the career as opposed to the ending of the career. Preliminary results indicate that those who come out early in their careers, face professional setbacks, such as having to be a free agent with no play time. Those who come out later in their careers do not face these setbacks. They do reveal the state of their mental health during their journey. According to the former New England Patriots offensive lineman Ryan O' Callaghan, "I think it's safe to say there is at least one on every team who is either gay or bisexual, a lot of guys still see it as potentially having a negative impact on their career"(Newnownext, 2019). Players like Callaghan expressed they suffer from mental illness such as depression, suicidal thoughts and even addiction. "I just don't think people understand reality, we can still get fired for being gay or denied services for being trans" (Newnownext, 2019).

Findings

Change doesn't come easy in male dominated sports. The terms fear or afraid coincide with the second level of coding which exemplifies the type of change the NFL isn't ready to embrace compared to the NBA. The NBA and MLB have dedicated events for athletes that

identify with the LGBTQ community. Most of the professional athletes who were in the closet experienced hazing and were terrified of their secret being revealed. The taunting takes place mainly in the locker rooms, “macho men territory”, where if there is a hint of estrogen or sensitivity, your mental health will start to deteriorate day by day, as a result of the gay slurs and anti LGTBQ auroras in the room.

The level of worrisome increases day by day if teammates aren’t aware of their sexuality or if they are against their sexuality. It is a constant reminder that you must remain strong and show no weakness or else you will suffer the latter. Many of the news outlets repeated the code secrecy, describing how the athlete is keeping one’s true self a secret. The term ‘gay’ meaning ‘happy’ is quite the contrary when it comes to a closeted gay professional athlete, due to the media constantly mistakenly interpreting the athlete’s normality as true happiness.

Many of the articles I coded remind society that the changes are happening but not as rapidly in the NFL. Many professional athletes are aware of their teammates identifying with the LGBTQ community, but I found the codes secrecy and hazing to coincide with one another ; the taunting of indirect jokes in the locker room, included terms like “fag” or “sissy” which are considered inside jokes, literally eating at them mentally is when the actual gay athlete suffers. The internalization of the feelings such as shame, embarrassment, worry, terrified and delicacy would expose his side of weakness in a way. Based on true testimonies & articles the term secrecy describes the “closeted athlete” out of the group (La Caruba P.M., 2014). If a teammate finds out his other teammate is gay, in solidarity they want to keep the brother-ship as teammates but that can also be challenging mentally. The ethnomethodology & constructivism of an NFL player who identifies as gay, shows that he wants to reveal himself, but he can’t because he feels he will lose his contract, his family and possibly teammates may disown him due to being associated with them off the field, or the coach may lessen his playtime on the field.

I analyzed a pattern of events, attitudes and behaviors while generating codes

- Football players come out AFTER they have played so many years, near retirement- **Event**
- Millennials come out sooner than later these days (Michael Sam, Ryan Russell)-**Event**
- Football players wait until they marry their partner to reveal that they are gay (having the support, feeling complete in this aspect of their life)-former cowboy linebacker Jeff Rohrer-outsports-Sep.2019-**Behavior**
- The NFL practices secrecy by withholding the fact that they know and accept – bleacher report November 2013 – **Behavior**
- The player and the NFL are both afraid and want to avoid intense media coverage - **Attitude/Feeling**
- NFL speaks, mentions inclusion & diversity but they don't have a designated day dedicated to the LGBTQ community like the NBA, MLB or WNBA- **Attitude/Feeling**
- **Key People-** Jerry Smith (the NFL network produced a documentary on him being gay) **Michael Sam, Ryan Russell, Jeff Rohrer**
- MLS athletes constantly reference gay locker room slurs frequently, “faggot”.

Discussion/Conclusion

Based on coding, the National Football League is hesitant to accept active football players who identify with the LGBTQ community compared to other major sport organizations. The LGBTQ community feels like the NFL doesn't care about the football players mental health or who they identify as in the media.

The Structuralist View

Since September of 2019, there have only been 13 openly gay and bi-sexual players in the NFL, who have existed since 09/17/1920 according to the Professional Football Hall of Fame. The NBA was founded in 1946 and has only had one openly gay player who came out in 2013 later in his career. Jason Collins was the 1st openly gay athlete to come out in one of the 4 major professional American sports. Since then, NBA commissioner Adam Silver has received praise for standing up for realizing the importance of equal rights for LGBTQ athletes. Jason

Collins has been the face of the NBA LGBTQ movement and has inspired other professional female athletes as well, but many NBA players still don't feel comfortable coming out.

In the world of male dominating sports, males are not allowed to come out the closet for the sake of the game, if they do, they face discrimination, rejection and the possibility of losing their career. Homophobic slurs in the locker rooms still take place today and the burdens the closeted athletes feel are beyond reach. Many NBA players have relatives who identify with the LGBTQ community or even siblings.

NBA veteran Reggie Bullock, for example, lost his sister Mia Henderson, who was born as Kevin, Reggie's older brother. This tragedy shows how people who identify with the LGBTQ community can be underrepresented and even deemed as an unprotected minority by not receiving enough attention to receive justice. If a man is deemed sensitive or shows feminine tendencies, their sexuality is questioned; if a woman dares to participate in a male domineering sport, her sexuality is automatically questioned (*The Sport Journal*, 2018). This correlates to a male athlete's sexuality being questioned when he shows signs of sensitivity or feminine tendencies.

Seattle Sounders left back Marc Burch made a comment about a fellow player using the term "f—t". As a result, he was ordered to attend sensitivity training & a three game suspension which in turn would end his season (Hannan, 2012). The MLS takes slurs seriously in this matter (Hannan, 2012). The major sports leagues are trying to understand the new millennials of generational change that are accepting of all sexualities regardless of their socioeconomic status or choice of career, which will be a good move in the sporting world.

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